Media Monitor

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Roe v. Webster

Media Coverage of the Abortion Debate

How have the media covered the abortion debate? Has the coverage been even-handed? And did the *Webster* case make a difference? We analyzed 333 print and broadcast news items, including 36 opinion pieces, that ran from January 1 through August 31. This included 118 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news (7 hours 19 minutes of airtime) and 179 news stories and 36 opinion pieces in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Major findings:

■ **Gender Gap** - In stories reported by women, pro-choice views outnumbered pro-life views by two to one. In stories reported by men, the two sides were evenly balanced. *Page 6*

■ **Which Issues?** The pro-choice side dominated the legalization debate. But the pro-life side won out in the debates over *Roe v. Wade*'s status, government funding, morality, and the onset of life. *Page 4*

■ **Whose Views?** Pro-choice activist sources outnumbered their pro-life counterparts by a five to three margin. The most quoted group was the National Organization for Women; the most-quoted individual was NARAL Director Kate Michelman. *Page 3*

■ **What's In a Name?** Newspaper reporters usually called the two sides "abortion rights" and "anti-abortion." But television reporters usually called them "pro-choice" and anti-abortion." *Page 4*

■ **Abortion News** - TV carried over twice as much coverage of demonstrations as the *Times* and *Post*. *Page 3*

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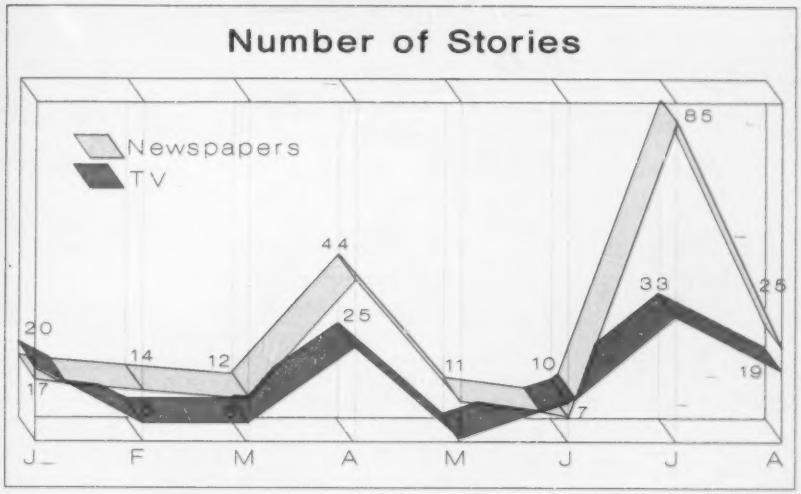
The Abortion Story

We analyzed news and opinion items on abortion from January 1 to August 31, 1989. The big news was the case of *Webster* v. *Reproductive Health Services*, which the Supreme Court decided to hear in January. Oral arguments began in April and the decision was announced July 3, assuring a continuing flow of news. Other newsworthy events during this period included annual pro-choice and pro-life marches in Washington and various state level court cases. All this activity (but especially the *Webster* case) generated heavy coverage in the national media - 333 news items in the five outlets we analyzed. The *New York Times* ran 103 news stories and 9 opinion pieces (editorials and signed columns) totalling 1960 column inches. The *Washington Post's* coverage was somewhat lengthier and more opinion oriented - 76 news stories and 27 opinion pieces totalling 2413 column inches. Together the papers printed 215 items covering 4373 inches, the equivalent of 38 full news pages of text. Television contributed 118 stories for a cumulative 7 hours 19 minutes of airtime. ABC (160 minutes) and NBC (154 minutes) aired the most coverage, while CBS lagged behind (125 minutes).



Abortion is the Vietnam of this generation.

-Bella Abzug
N.Y. Times,
8/6

Courts and Controversies

Abortion news this year has been strongly event driven, focusing on high-profile judicial and political struggles. By far the most heavily covered event was the Supreme Court's decision on *Webster* v. *Reproductive Health Services*, which generated 127 stories. Running neck-and-neck with *Webster* in the race for news were political demonstrations by activists. The 126 demonstration stories were split almost evenly between those organized by pro-choice (67 stories) and pro-life groups (59). The other major news focus was on state level struggles over abortion laws through the courts, in the legislatures, and at the polls. The 91 state level stories were led by the battles in Florida (10), New York (8), and New Jersey (8).

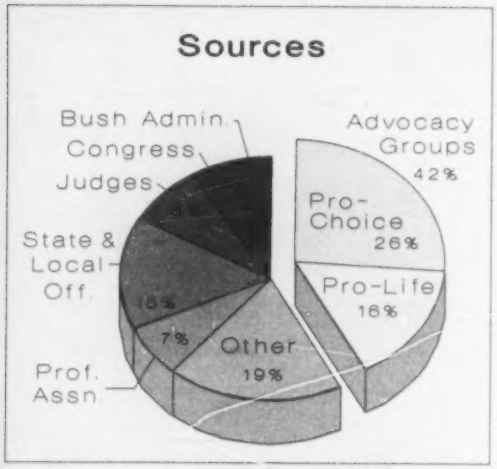
On a topic notable for the passions it generates, the coverage contained a relative absence of in-depth treatment. Topics such as public opinion, health issues related to abortions (or abortion bans), government funding of abortions, and historical perspectives on the debate received relatively little attention. This was particularly true of television, which rarely went beyond cataloguing ongoing events. TV news devoted over twice as much of its coverage to demonstrations as the newspapers did (32% of all TV stories vs. 15% of print articles). By contrast, the print media dominated in covering several areas of background analysis, including 80% of the reports on public opinion and almost 90% of the stories on the history of the controversy, the debate over public funding, and associated health issues. Combined, the three networks aired only 16 reports on these four topics, compared to 97 stories in the *Times* and *Post*.

Topics

	Stories
1. Webster Case	127
2. Demonstrations	126
Pro-Choice (67)	
Pro-Life (59)	
3. State-Level Struggles	91
4. History	36
5. Other Court Cases	30
6. Opinion Polls	28
6. Health Issues	28
8. Government Funding	19

Whose Views?

The abortion story drew on a wide range of sources, including judges and legislators at all levels of government, professional associations and ordinary citizens. But the key sources of opinion and information were the activists on both sides of this contentious issue. Pro-choice and pro-life advocates accounted for 42% of all sources quoted, by far the largest slice of the pie. Of the two sides, pro-choicers fared better. They were cited 538 times, 26% of the total. Pro-lifers were cited 331 times or 16% of all sources. This five to three margin of difference was roughly similar at the *Times*, the *Post*, and the networks.



The pro-choice movement's advantage was aided by the high visibility of several organizations. The National Organization for Women (NOW) led all groups with 75 citations, followed closely by the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) with 72, then Planned Parenthood with 40 and the American Civil Liberties Union (especially its Reproductive Freedom Project) with 20. By contrast, only two pro-life groups enjoyed a high media profile - National Right to Life with 65 citations and Operation Rescue with 28.

The pro-choice lead was also reflected at the level of individual sources. The most quoted individuals on abortion were NARAL Executive Director Kate Michelman (42 citations) and NOW President Molly Yard (34). Among the dozen individuals in double figures were five pro-choice activists, including Planned Parenthood President Faye Wattleton, former NOW head Eleanor Smeal, and Norma McCorvey ("Jane Roe"). The pro-life activists placed only two - National Right to Life President John Willke and Operation Rescue head Randall Terry. The pro-life side benefitted from the high media profiles of allies like George Bush, the only public official among the top twelve, and three of the four Supreme Court justices who were heavily quoted. The only individuals to make at least 10 source appearances on TV news were Michelman (16), Yard (16), and Bush (12).

When uterus owners begin to vote this issue, we will win.

-Pro-choice activist
NBC, 4/26

Individuals Quoted

Kate Michelman	42
Molly Yard	34
George Bush	22
Harry Blackmun	19
Sandra Day O'Connor	16
John Willke	16
William Rehnquist	14
Anthony Scalia	14
Norma McCorvey	10
Eleanor Smeal	10
Randall Terry	10
Faye Wattleton	10

Government sources were split about evenly between Washington and the state and local levels. State and local officials made up 15% of those quoted, the Supreme Court and other federal judges accounted for 8%, the Bush administration provided 5% and Congress 4%. Another frequent source of information (7% of all citations) were professional associations and their members, ranging from the American College of Obstetrics to the American Psychiatric Association.

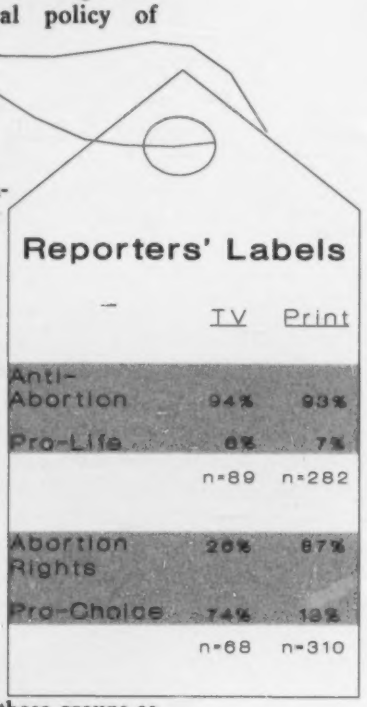
It's anti-American to be pro-choice.

-Mayor of Richmond, VA
Wash. Post
7/8

Naming Names

Activist groups in the abortion debate usually identify themselves as either "pro-choice" or "pro-life". But the media have vacillated between using these and the alternative designations "abortion rights" vs. "anti-abortion" to identify the two sides. In fact, the

Washington Post officially adopted the latter terms and banned the former in a departure from its normal policy of identifying groups as they wish to be identified (*WP*, 4/25). The *Post* noted that "the mainstream media. . . find it increasingly difficult even to identify the respective advocates without appearing to take sides." The importance of labelling was noted by an abortion rights advocate upholding the "pro-choice" designation, "The right-to-lifers keep saying we're 'pro-abortion' and I don't think that's true. I wouldn't want to have an abortion. But I would like to have the option." (*Post*, 4/9).



Our study confirmed that both *Post* and *Times* reporters overwhelmingly designated these groups as "abortion-rights" or "anti-abortion," although they used the term "pro-choice" about twice as frequently as "pro-life" or "right to life" (13% vs. 7% of all designations, respectively). On television, however, one side succeeded in getting its preferred label across. Television reporters preferred "pro-choice" over "abortion rights" labels, by nearly a three to one margin (74% to 26%). But they rarely used "pro-life " or "right to life" to describe the other side - only 6% of all labels, compared to 94% usage of "anti-abortion." (When these groups described themselves, they usually used the terms "pro-choice" and "pro-life" repectively. *Media Monitor* retained these self-designations.)

Abortion is black genocide

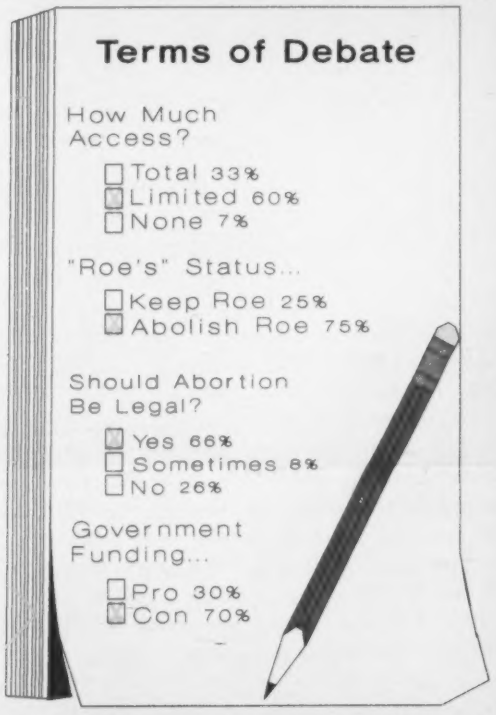
-Rev. Peter Lucas
Wash. Post
4/27

Terms of Debate

The heated quality of the abortion debate was reflected in the profusion of opinion that appeared in the media. But the distribution of opinion depended heavily on how the issue was raised. Pro-choicers were heard most often arguing that abortion should be legal and a woman's right unqualified. Pro-lifers made the news to argue for overturning *Roe*, restricting government funding, declaring that abortion is immoral and that life begins at conception.

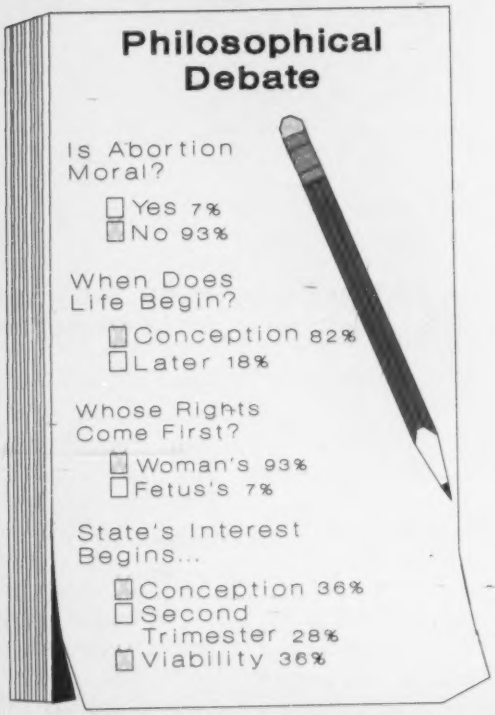
We included viewpoints from opinion pieces as well as news stories to measure the overall distribution of opinion to which readers were exposed. Further, the two genres tended to move in the same direction: On a particular issue, the position most favored in news reports was also favored in editorials, op-eds, and other signed columns. But opinion pieces counted for only a small fraction of the viewpoints that were written and aired on abortion.

By far the largest single focus of dispute was over the legality of abortion, which generated 140 opinions. The pro-choice side dominated the legalization issue, as two out of three sources (66%) argued that abortion should



remain legal. Only 34% argued that it should be illegal, including 8% who specified that exceptions should be made in extraordinary circumstances such as pregnancies arising from rape or incest. The pro-choice side predominated by over three to one (77% to 23%) on TV news, 64% to 36% in the *Post*, and 58% to 42% in the *Times*. For example, the *Post*

(4/10) quoted one woman as saying, "It might not be my decision to have an abortion, but I should have the right to make that decision." Among seven opinion pieces that took a stand on this issue, six favored the pro-choice position.



The pro-choice argument also won out when a woman's rights were balanced against those of the fetus. In this infrequently discussed but highly emotional debate, a woman's rights were presented as paramount 9 times out of 14 (64%). Thus, the *Post* (4/27) described a sign posted on a New York City church, which argued against "treating fetal life as fully human when existent female human persons are not valued at least to the same degree."

The pro-life side was heard most often in expressing opposition to *Roe* v. *Wade*. *Roe's* status was argued 64 times, and 48 of those sources (75%) spoke against it. Anti-*Roe* sentiment was strongest on television with 89% opposition, compared to 77% in the *Post* and 62% in the *Times*. Thus, on CBS (7/3), Randall Terry argued that *Roe* should be overruled so that "child killing will be driven back to Hell where it came from." The abolition of *Roe* was also favored in opinion pieces by a margin of 7 to 3. The pro-life position was also ascendant in the debate over government funding for abortion. Seventy percent of the 47 sources rejected the use of state funds, even after we included the pro-choice argument that this restriction harms poor women. But the outcome varied sharply by outlet. Government assistance was never advocated on television but was favored by a majority (53%) of sources in the *Times*, and one in four (26%) at the *Post*.

They say it's like the Civil War, there's no suitable middle ground.

-Lisa Myers-
NBC, 4/26

The pro-life forces also fared better on two themes that underlay the debate - the morality of abortion and the question of when life begins. When the issue of morality was raised explicitly, the purpose was almost always to decry the moral status of abortion. It was denounced as immoral 26 times out of 28 (93%) and defended as moral only once; one source also argued that it was not a moral issue. For example, William F. Buckley compared abortion to incest and wife-beating as acts that legitimately bring the law into the bedroom: "That abortion clinics do their job as neatly as crematoriums doesn't affect the moral nature of the transaction." (*Post*, 7/8). Pro-lifers were also heard most often on the question of when life begins. The answer was "at conception" in 82% of the 38 instances this question was raised, including all 13 of the television sound bites on this issue. Thus, the *Times* (4/23) quoted a Knights of Columbus legal brief, "If a 'viable' unborn child is a person, then so are all unborn children."

On two other widely debated issues there was no clear advantage for either side. First, although most sources argued that life begins at birth and that government should not fund abortion, opinion was fragmented over when the state's interest in preserving life begins. This question was addressed almost entirely in print (37 of 39 sources). Only 28% of sources argued for the framework established in *Roe*, which allows the state to regulate abortions beginning in the second trimester. The remaining sources were split evenly (36% apiece) between arguing that the states can protect life from the moment of conception, on one hand, or once it is deemed viable by medical experts, on the other.

Opinion was also split on the question of how accessible abortion should be to adults or minors. This issue came up 27 times without raising questions of legality. Unrestricted access was favored by 33%, limited access by 60% (limits included spousal or parental consent, required counseling etc.), and no access by 7%.

No source specifically argued for eliminating teenagers' access to abortion; 28% favored unrestricted access and 72% limited access for minors.

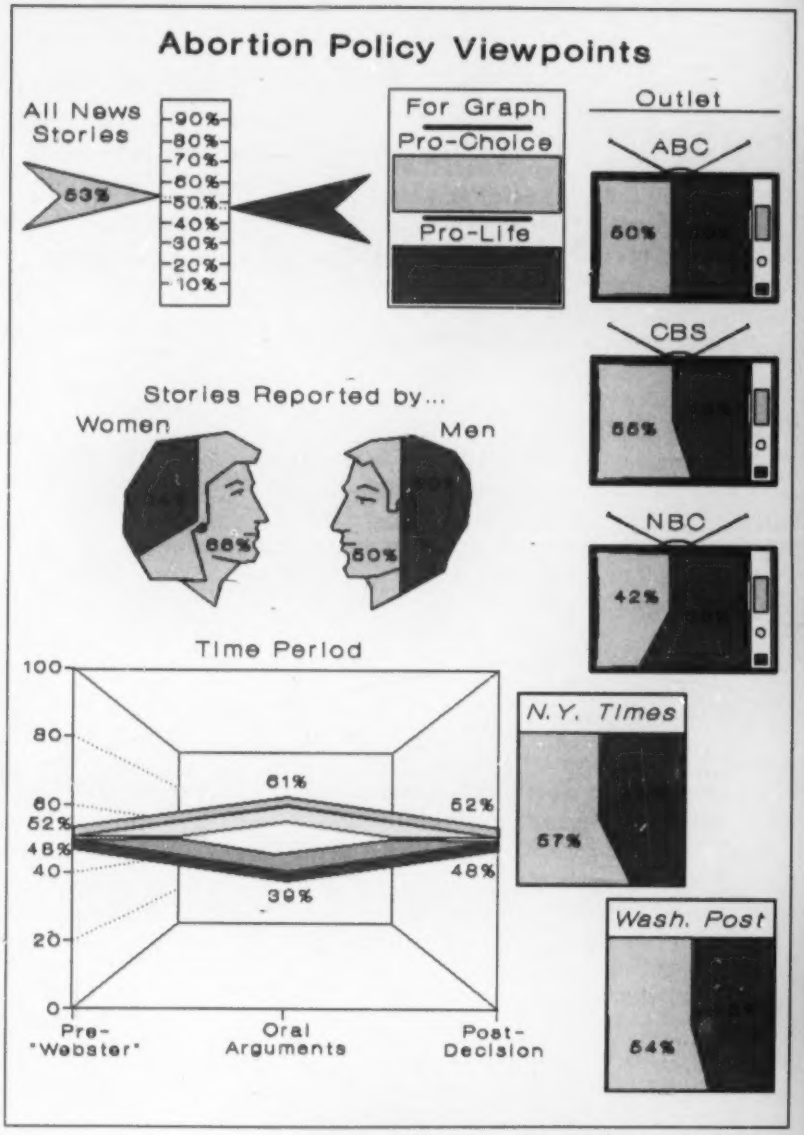
Despite the multifaceted nature of the abortion debate, numerous issues got short shift in the media. Among the not-ready-for-prime-time issues were father's rights, the appropriateness of abortion for purposes of contraception or eugenics, and the existence of a right to regulate procreation. Print outlets were notable for their greater in-depth treatment, while television better conveyed the raw emotional quality of the debate.

The Gender Gap

To create a single index of pro-life vs. pro-choice sentiment on abortion policy, we combined source viewpoints on questions of abortion legality, *Roe*'s legal status, government funding, and other policy-related issues, in news stories only. Only 77 of the 269 arguments included appeared on the T.V. news, illustrating the more substantive coverage of print outlets. On our summary measure of views on abortion policy, the pro-choice side had a slight edge (53% to 47%). Opinion pieces produced an almost identical split, favoring the pro-choice position by 54% to 46%. There was little variation across news outlets. The pro-choice margin rose as high as 57% at the *Times* and fell to 42% on NBC, the only outlet that carried a majority of pro-life views. Nor was there much difference over time, although pro-choice sentiment peaked at 61% while *Webster* was being argued, compared to 52% both prior to the case and after the decision.

One factor, however, was associated with a striking difference in coverage. In stories reported by males, the two sides were evenly balanced. In stories reported by females, pro-choice outnumbered pro-life views by a two to one margin. (These figures do not include stories, such as wire service reports, for which the reporter's gender could not be determined). This almost never involved reporters stating their own opinions, but rather their selection of sources and quotes. The gender gap in coverage was evident in both print and TV news. At the newspapers, pro-choice views predominated nearly 3 to 1 (74% to 26%) in articles authored by women, but only 55% to 45% in those written by men. On network news, male reporters presented pro-life positions more often (60% to 40%), while female reporters gave the pro-choice stance more visibility (58% to 42%).

The difference even extended to opinion articles. Those written by women contained 75% pro-choice and 25% pro-life viewpoints. In opinion pieces authored by men, pro-life views held a 54% to 46% majority over pro-choice views.



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